

Wilderness gains ground

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GLASTENBURY — The members of Vermont's congressional delegation have proposed a bill that would designate a large amount of land in Bennington County and throughout the state as federally protected wilderness.

The Vermont Wilderness Act of 2006, introduced on Thursday by Sens. James Jeffords and Patrick Leahy and Rep. Bernard Sanders, expands on a proposal by the U.S. Forest Service to set aside Vermont lands as wilderness.

In Bennington County, the act would preserve about 28,500 acres in the Glastenbury Mountain area and about 2,200 acres in the Winhall and Stratton area as part of what's being called the "Lye Brook expansion."

The legislators are suggesting the addition of about 48,000 acres of wilderness land to the Green Mountain National Forest. The U.S. Forest Service's suggestion was about 27,500 acres.

"This legislation will help the Green Mountain National Forest remain one of Vermont's most precious environmental treasures, while continuing to support our state's economic and recreational needs," Jeffords said in a statement.

In wilderness areas, motorized vehicles, as well as bicycles, are forbidden. So is timber harvesting. Recreational activities allowed include camping, hiking, hunting, fishing and canoeing.

The Southern Vermont coordinator for Forest Watch, Richard Andrews, said that while environmentalists generally appreciated the bill, many feel it should have gone further. Forest Watch would have liked to see the wilderness expanded in the Glastenbury and Lye Brook areas so they would connect at the Kelly Stand Road.

Recent research indicates that preserved wilderness in the Northeast should be at least 25,000 to 40,000 acres, according to Andrews. Otherwise, a natural disaster could wipe out some of the features of a forest.

Andrews said he was still very pleased by the attention given to the subject.

"They have a lot on their plate. Leahy is on the judicial committee, Bernie is running for Senate, Jeffords is preparing to retire. ... These are busy guys. But they still found time for something that's very important to most Vermonters," he said.

Some local legislators aren't happy with the proposal, however. State Sen. Mark Shepard, R-Bennington/Wilmington, who is running for the U.S. House, said he and state Rep. Mary Morrissey, R-Bennington, had worked on a resolution opposing the expansion of wilderness. It was approved in the House, but Shepard said it never went anywhere in the Senate.

Shepard said he was "very disappointed" by the bill because it would discourage hunting and fishing and limit public access to public land.

But Jeffords' staff member, Tom Berry, said that the congressional delegation had been very conscious of the various needs of Vermonters and tried to choose its recommendations carefully.

"This new wilderness area, together with the more intensely used federal lands, will provide residents of Bennington County a great diversity of activities within their national forest," he said.

The future of the bill is still touch and go because it's so late in the legislative session, according to Leahy's spokesman, David Carl. The bill will next go to the Senate Agriculture Committee, where Leahy was once the

chairman and is still a senior member.